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Staging Repentance: A Discourse Analysis of Mediated Confession in Xi Jinping's First Five-Year Term

Yuanyuan LIU

Abstract: Since Xi Jinping took office as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, he has been tightening ideological control across many fronts. This article investigates how the framing of televised confessions facilitates Xi's rule. Originating from the intra-Party disciplinary technique of self-criticism, the recent resurgence of mediated confessions reflects Xi's pursued strategy in tackling social and political challenges. Applying critical discourse analysis to the case of the disappeared Swedish bookseller Gui Minhai, this paper shows the way in which the framing of Gui's televised confession follows Xi's so-called rule of law agenda and selectively appeals to traditional Chinese family values. The paper argues that the propaganda value of the televised confession from a little-known, non-Party confessant lies in its banality, which blends into the Party's everyday narration. The resurgence of confessions might suggest a regression towards Maoist-style campaigns, but more audience-oriented research is needed to address this issue fully.

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Keywords: China, media framing, socialist rule of law with Chinese characteristics, confession, Xi Jinping

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Introduction

Since Xi Jinping became the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, he has been amassing huge personal power and tightening ideological control across many fronts (Minzner 2015; Shirk 2018). Meanwhile, there has been a considerable debate on the degree to which Xi can be called the "new Mao" (Buckley 2017; Phillips 2017; Brown and Van Nieuwenhuizen 2016; Zhao 2016; Lam 2012). Some have observed a recent rise in the number of television confessions (Minzner 2018; Fiskesjö 2017). Confession, or self-criticism, has been an intra-Party disciplinary technique since the early days of the CCP. It gradually evolved into a mass mobilisation tool and spread beyond the Party during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) (Dittmer 1973). The technocratic reform era saw the political use of self-criticism fade out of ordinary people's daily lives. The recent appearance of such confessions on TV, especially those featuring non-Party members, shows that the CCP regards this technique as being very useful in tackling the challenges that it is facing today.

Xi's era has witnessed dozens of TV confessions, involving people from all walks of life. There were journalists who confessed to having produced false reports, public intellectuals who admitted having spread rumours, celebrities who took drugs, and ethnic minorities who committed murder and took part in looting in Xinjiang (Yoon 2015; Mitchell 2014). However, TV confessions have received only limited academic attention to date. Through the ongoing case of Gui Minhai, this article thus provides an in-depth examination of the official ideological framing in operation here.

Gui was born in Ningbo, southeast China, but is currently a Swedish citizen who does not hold Chinese citizenship. Before his disappearance, he made a living from selling books in Hong Kong. Some of his works are "thinly-sourced, tabloid-style political books […] which are outlawed in mainland China" (Holmes and Phillips 2015: paragraph 22). He was one of the five Hong Kong Causeway Bay booksellers who were kidnapped by mainland authorities due to, as widely speculated, their book businesses. Gui's case is unique due to his multiple identities and connections with mainland China, Hong Kong, and Sweden. His case can be viewed as a prism, refracting the multiple relations that the framing needs to construct and coordinate simultaneously. Yet Gui's case also captures a series of traits that are

shared across TV confessions (Safeguard Defenders 2018). TV confessions are politically motivated, yet they are often framed as anything but politically relevant (more on this later).

Taken together, Gui's confession is a synthesis of various identities, relations, and discourses. However, by no means does Gui's case encompass all the traits of TV confessions. Nor can it produce a generalised conclusion about TV confessions on its own. This article only aims to dissect the working mechanism of language in the production of ideology, taking the first step towards the examination of scores of TV confessions that have appeared on the country's screens since 2012.

By applying Fairclough's three-dimensional critical discourse analysis (CDA), this paper identifies two prominent discourses: the "rule of law" discourse and the "family values" discourse. It is worth noting that the rule of law discourse in this article is shorthand for "socialist rule of law with Chinese characteristics," which is the official translation of Xi's definition of "ruling the country according to law." It underlines the indispensable and leading role of the CCP in building the legal system in China, and distinguishes itself from any other forms of rule of law (Li 2018: 3). The analysis begins with linguistically determining two of Gui's identities. It then examines the way in which the production of the TV confession induces the preferred interpretation. In particular, the analysis is interested in the role of narrator and the strategic omission of certain information. Lastly, the analysis looks at the factor of resonance in China today. It investigates the specific cultural resonance that the confession appeals to.

The result indicates that Gui is constructed linguistically as a criminal and an unfilial son. The narration actively guides the interpretation of Gui as a law-breaking and morally degraded person. The framing conforms to Xi's latest emphasis on the socialist rule of law with Chinese characteristics and the traditional family value of filial piety – with the modern twist of the "one-child policy" (1979–2015). The paper highlights the strategic use of "traditional culture" and "virtues" in framing, and draws attention to the banal but potentially beguiling nature of TV confessions. The confession functions as a constructed portrayal of consent among the confessant, the public, and the Party, maintaining superficial conformity to the status quo.

This study is important for two reasons. First, it provides a glimpse into the intricate process by which Xi's ideological predilec-

tions come into operation. There is a dialectic relationship between language and society: both actively shape, and are shaped by, each other (Fairclough 2001). It is obvious that certain people, thoughts, and terminologies have come to appear more frequently today in official documents and rhetoric. However, do they work exactly as the Party had hoped? The dialectical relationship between language and society means that through a close examination of discourse, the study is able to show the specific context that gives rise to the discourses, and how these in turn shape the context according to the Party's own expectations.

Second, understanding TV confessions and the timing of their resurgence can establish a more nuanced understanding of Chinese "tradition." Such tradition – seemingly constant and everlasting – is often far from a mere set of fixed neutral practices. Its pervasiveness and taken-for-granted nature mean that it is potentially more subtle but effective method than blasting out political slogans to get the message across. Consequently, it is harder to detect or resist – and thus deserves more attention.

The article is structured as follows. It first reviews the historical background to the Party-led confession and the critical application of framing theory within the Chinese media system. It then explains the rationale for using CDA, and proceeds to the detailed analysis of Gui's TV confession. The article concludes with a discussion as to the implications of the discourses identified.

Self-criticism, Confession, and the CCP

The recent phenomenon of a person apologising for his or her wrongdoing on TV is known as "televised confession" (电视忏悔, *dianshi chanhui* or 电视逼供, *dianshi bigong*). Confession is neither uniquely Chinese nor an invention of Xi's era. It has, indeed, a long history in religious practice both within and outside China (Wu 1979; Tentler 1977). Over the years it has taken many forms, such as autobiographies, psychoanalytical therapies, legal confessions, governance strategies, and political show trials (Hu 2012; Taylor 2009; Payne 2008; Foucault 1998). The media has also revamped confession, blurring the public–private boundary, altering its function, and transforming its power (Burkart 2010). However, mediated confessions in Chi-

na have received comparatively little attention from academics. This study aims, then, to bridge this research gap.

Recent TV confessions can be traced back to the practice of criticism and self-criticism, and Soviet-style show trials (Fiskesjö 2017; Hu 2012; Lu 2004). Self-criticism, together with criticism, is a tool to discipline erring cadres. The essence of such practice is a hierarchical order in which the powerful demand that the weak show submission through both physical and psychological pressure. It was originally designed to prevent disagreement within the Party from reaching a tipping point (Dittmer 1973). This intra-Party mediating mechanism usually included a temporary alienation of the cadre who was under investigation through a collective criticism session. This cadre had to not only accept the criticism but also conduct self-criticism. Normally, the cadre remoulded his or her thoughts and behaviours during the process, and thus was reintegrated to the group (Schurmann 1959). The above process, as Dittmer (1974) argues, was Liu Shaoqi's model of criticism and self-criticism. Originating from the Nationalist enemy-controlled area where Liu had overseen underground CCP activities in the 1920s and 1930s, his model was concise, structured, clandestine, and reason-oriented.

Liu's model is lesser known compared with Mao Zedong's Yan'an one, which prioritised the correct substance in criticism. If the criticism did not support the Party leadership, it was antagonistic. The purpose thus was not so much to amend past errors but to show submission, demonstrate loyalty, to educate, and to intimidate the disobedient (Rowe 2014).

It was Mao's model that gradually spread beyond the CCP to the grass-roots level. After 1949, the Party no longer faced an immediate threat to its survival. Its monopoly over mass communication facilities paved the way for the appearance of mediated self-criticism. That of provincial and central Party leaders could be found in the *People's Daily* in the early 1950s. Within a decade, the confessants spread to high-profile members from the eight minority parties recognised by the CCP. During the Cultural Revolution, mass media became an essential tool in popularising self-criticism among the masses (Dittmer 1973). The self-criticism of local cadres, factory workers, and village leaders appeared also in the *People's Daily*. With the death of Mao, the practice reverted to an intra-Party disciplinary measure and mostly faded out of public view (Minzner 2018).

The two models, and especially Mao's, were representations of a strict hierarchical order. Criticism was always initiated by powerful, high-ranking leaders against cadres of lesser rank, or the masses. Accordingly, self-criticism was expected from weaker subordinates (Hu 2012; Apter and Saich 1994). Those who listened to the confession commanded enormous power because they were deemed knowledgeable and ideologically pure enough to judge the sincerity of the self-criticism. Even in the case of the Cultural Revolution, where the masses criticised Party officials, this occurred because they were incited to do so by Mao – the most powerful leader – and due to the Party officials conducting self-criticism being no longer in power. As such criticism is a political tool of the dominant to exercise their authority, while self-criticism or confession is the manifestation of the weak submitting to it.

Xi's first five-year term witnessed a resurgence of mediated confessions, yet the existing literature focuses mostly on the Mao-era ones (Sun 2013; Hu 2012; Dittmer 1973). Fiskesjö, a friend of Gui, is one of the few scholars to have directed their attention to the recent TV confessions. From the perspective of Soviet show trials and "clean torture," he argues that TV confessions – as a form of staged conformity – show the domination and gross violation of human rights (Fiskesjö 2017). I agree with most of his argumentation, but nevertheless do not view TV confessions as a media spectacle on the same scale as show trials. Instead, I argue that the framing of the TV confession bears greater resemblance to ordinary crime news. In early 2018, the human rights group Safeguard Defenders published a pioneering report which summarises the characteristics of recent TV confessions. Selective as it may be, the report reveals the coercive measures behind these seemingly voluntary acts undertaken between 2013 and 2018.

Interviews with 45 confessants show that they were pressured, threatened, or even tortured into conducting these TV confessions. The confessants revealed that they were either told exactly what to say or given general scripts for the confession. It turns out that the directors of TV confessions are security agents, rather than staff from China Central Television (CCTV). The report highlights the purpose of TV confessions as three "Ds": "deny," "denounce," "defend" (Gardner 2018; Safeguard Defenders 2018). Deny means that the confession often includes lines rebutting criticism directed towards

the Party. Denounce denotes that the confessant is ordered to attack certain people, organisations, or even a nation in their confessions. The last task for the confessant is to defend. Not only does the confessant have to reject the criticism levelled against the Party: he or she has to praise the government, the police, the legal system, or even the crackdown on him/herself. This paper later demonstrates that the three Ds are also present in Gui's confession. Next, I examine media framing theory in the context of China's contemporary official media.

The Application of Media Framing Theory in Xi's China

Framing theory has been in wide application across a number of different academic disciplines (Hallahan 1999; Lemert and Branaman 1997; Schön and Rein 1994; Ryan 1991; Gitlin 1980; Tannen 1979; van Dijk 1977). Its application in the media is particularly useful in this study (Entman 1993a; D'Angelo 2002; de Vreese 2012). Frames in the media are "the characteristics of the news text" (Entman 1991: 7). Through selection and reutilisation, certain aspects of media content are made more salient and persistent than others (Entman 1993b; Gitlin 1980). Therefore, media framing is a selective construction of events where certain characteristics of texts or themes outweigh others. Metaphors, historical examples, catchphrases, depictions, and visual images often indicate the location of frames in media texts (Gamson and Modigliani 1989). Together they identify, diagnose, suggest solutions to, and make moral claims on the topic in question. The success of framing depends on the relatively constant social cultural background – or "cultural resonance" – that is specific to a society at a particular moment (Ferree 2003).

Media framing theory is applied to this study here in a critical manner. Since the theory has been developed on the basis of cases predominantly from Western democracies, it has some default assumptions as to journalistic professional norms, checks and balances in political systems, and responsibilities of business corporations. For example: journalists often have the duty to keep powerful institutions in check; the media is supposed to be a contested public sphere where various participants voice different opinions; and, meanwhile, the business interests of big media organisations can be at odds with their expected media responsibilities. There are important differences

between authoritarian political environments and their liberal democratic counterparts in terms of the ways in which relationships between political elites, the media, business corporations, and ordinary people intertwine.

The application of media framing theory in this study closely relates to the role of the official media in China, which has always been at the forefront of constructing common beliefs so as to facilitate the Party's rule. Guiding the official media has been, mostly, the "Party Principle": that the media is to serve the Party (Zhao 1998). Since 1949, the Party's management of the media has followed its political control over society. The media enjoyed much freedom in the early days of the People Republic of China before plunging into the "Dark Ages" (Lu 2004: 164) of Mao's continuous ideologically oriented political and economic campaigns. Journalism became an instrument for political propaganda and indoctrination. Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms restored some freedom in the mid-1980s when liberal-democratic media ideals entered China. However, the aftermath of the 1989 student movement saw a return to the rigid model of media-as-mouthpiece. Only in 1992 did new reform opportunities arrive when Deng's Southern Tour put economic reform back on track. The media, together with many other industries in China, had to commercialise to survive. It ultimately formed a hybrid structure which is under the influence of both the Party and the market (Stockmann 2012; Zhao 2008).

Despite economic reform and the freedom that it has brought, the core of the official media today is still the Party Principle. Ranking China 176 out of 180 in the 2017 World Press Freedom Index, the non-governmental organisation Reporters without Borders describes President Xi as "the instigator of policies aimed at complete hegemony over news coverage" (Reporters Without Borders 2017). During Xi's visit to CCTV in February 2016, a slogan prominently displayed on a large screen behind the president declared that the media must be "surnamed Party" (Rudolph 2016).

Journalistic norms and the institutional practices of the official media are both strictly under the guidance of the Party. Commercialisation and technological advancement have challenged the CCP's monopoly on information, and encouraged people's participation in media production. However, the Party Principle remains the official media standard. Economic reform certainly brought changes to it,

but not in terms of what roles the media plays – only how it plays them.

Methodology

Discourse, Society, and CDA

Discourses, including linguistic, visual, and audio elements, both reflect and shape social orders (Jaworski and Coupland 2014). Changes in the use of language can be a sign of social shifts, which ultimately link to changing power relations (Fairclough 1993). This study applies Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA to investigate how the TV confession is framed in order to maintain the CCP's rule. Together with many other schools within CDA, it concerns the mechanisms of language, power, and ideology. It explores the role of language in political struggle, inequality, and domination (Breeze 2011). Such analysis can demonstrate the relationship between discourses and social orders through three steps. It begins by unpacking the textual linguistic features of the item under study. It then interprets the effects of the production and consumption of the discourse. Finally, it explains the social, cultural, and political environments that give rise to the discourse (Fairclough 2003, 2001, 1993).

There are three main reasons to choose CDA. First, it provides a normative and explanatory critique of discourse, evaluating it against what ought to be right (Fairclough 2017). Considering the overtly political nature of the official media in China, my choosing of CDA is only to state the obvious – namely, to reveal that the official media are reinforcing, rather than challenging, existing power relations. However, this is not to deny the complexity of the internal conflicting interests within the Party (McGregor 2010). At least in the case of TV confessions, the official media are active participants herein (Safeguard Defenders 2018). Regardless of which debates occur behind the scenes, the result is to deploy a "trial by media."

Second, as the result of normative claims, the explanatory interpretation follows what the CCP has always admitted – the aforementioned Party Principle. CDA has been criticised for the tendency to adopt ideologically motivated interpretations (Widdowson 2005, 1998; Stubbs 1997; Toolan 1997). The interpretation offered in this article is neither random nor mere personal preference. The CCP has never been shy about its control over society through the media, as

the Party Principle demonstrates. Therefore, it is reasonable to read the official framing in line with the current political advocacy of the Party. Lastly, CDA complements framing theory in that the latter focuses on the patterned and explicit features of a text whereas the former also takes into consideration what is purposefully left unsaid. What is left out of the picture is as important as what is carefully presented, if not more so.

The Case of Gui Minhai

Gui disappeared from his house in Thailand in late 2015. He abruptly appeared on CCTV news in early 2016, claiming to have handed himself in for a drink-driving accident which had occurred over a decade ago. It attracted much attention and raised many questions abroad. Broadcast on 17 January during the TV programme *Oriental Horizon*, the 10-and-a-half-minute-long news feature recounts an emotional tragedy. According to the story, Gui handed himself in to mainland police due to his guilty conscience for being a criminal at large and an irresponsible son. Gui confesses to drink-driving, killing a female university student and then escaping abroad during probation. His claim is backed up by a traffic policeman's recollection of the case and the victim's mother mourning of her only daughter. Meanwhile, Gui describes the restless life of illegal immigration abroad. The passing of his father and his mother being sick prompted him to return to China to face legal punishment and his moral duties. In tears, he expresses the regret of breaking up the victim's family and the failure to fulfil his filial duty to his own parents.

However, there are multiple discrepancies throughout the story. Small details such as the different Chinese characters in Gui's name and the different T-shirts he wears make Gui's confession look less voluntary. Escaping during probation was also an illogical choice. It contradicts a 2005 news report of the accident, which described Gui as being "willing to assume 'full responsibility' in the form of economic compensation" (Bandurski 2016: paragraph 12). These inconsistencies further question the authenticity of the confession. Moreover, what is unsaid is his real "crime" – publishing books about the private lives of top Chinese political leaders.

Analysis

CDA shows that there are two prominent discourses here. The following section lays out how Gui's two identities – which correspond to the respective discourses – are linguistically framed. It then shows the role of the narrator and of strategic omission in directing the interpretation of the confession. Lastly, the analysis explores the cultural resonance that has given rise to this framing.

Rule of Law Discourse

Gui's most prominent identity in the story is "criminal." His criminal status is both explicitly expressed and implicitly advocated. The news feature is explicitly framed as a crime story: Gui, a hit-and-run driver who lived abroad for years after fleeing, has now handed himself in. Gui is rarely directly called a criminal, but there are plenty of incriminating references. The traffic policeman mentions Gui as the "driver who caused the accident" (肇事司机, *zhaoshi siji*); the narrator describes Gui's years abroad as the "life of a fugitive" (逃亡生涯, *taowang shengya*). Even Gui is heard speaking of himself as a "criminal fugitive" (逃犯, *taofan)*. He describes his feeling of guilt as follows:

Excerpt One

Gui:

> […] After leaving the country, I had hoped that my mental pressure would've been alleviated. However, the pressure wasn't reduced. Actually, it became worse, as the feeling of guilt and shame grew day by day. On the one hand, I […] ran away from my responsibility, which […] further hurt the feelings of the victim's family. On the other hand, I left China illegally. Not only did I escape my original punishment, but also broke Chinese law again […] that was one more crime […] and so […] a sense of guilt and shame […] made me suffer long-term mental unrest. (*Oriental Horizon* 2016)

Gui's own account of shame and regret, together with the incriminating lexicon choices, underlines the typical restlessness of a fugitive, signalling explicitly his identification as a criminal. Gui's criminal status is also alluded to by the fact that he has "victims," indicating that he has brought harm to others. At the end of the news feature, the narrator adds that Gui is under investigation for "being involved

in other criminal activities" – suggesting that he is prone to reoffending. The details utilise and reflect the presupposed social and cultural norms surrounding the fear of crime (Chang 1990). By emphasising Gui's guilty nature both directly and indirectly, the details set the theme of the rule of law.

On the interpretive level, the production of the TV confession interdiscursively affects the subsequent interpretation of it. Packaged as a news feature, Gui's confession is merged seamlessly with the third-person narration. In particular, this narration plays a crucial role in guiding the interpretation of the story by following the checklist of the aforementioned three Ds: deny, denounce, defend. To deny the abduction accusation directed at the Chinese government, the female presenter begins the programme with "There have been many reports about Gui's so-called disappearance in foreign and Hong Kong media recently" (*Oriental Horizon* 2016). The "so-called disappearance" insinuates that Gui did not vanish for no reason. The news concludes with the following extract, echoing the previous so-called disappearance remark:

Excerpt Two

Narrator:

> Gui Minhai said the moment when he had decided to return to China and hand himself in, he was also ready to take the legal responsibility for all his actions. Gui handed himself in to mainland police in October 2015. However, to his surprise, some people with ulterior motives sensationalised his decision.

Gui Minhai:

> It was my voluntary choice to come back and hand myself in. It had nothing to do with anyone else. I don't wish any individuals or organisations, including the Swedish authorities, to be involved in or interfere with my returning to China. Although I hold Swedish nationality, I really feel that I am still Chinese. My roots are still in China. […] Therefore, I hope the Swedish authorities respect my personal […] choice, respect my privacy, and right to make this decision. Let me myself solve the problem. (*Oriental Horizon* 2016)

In the example, the narrator guides the interpretation of the text by speaking on behalf of Gui. The narrator leads the audience to believe that Gui was genuinely "surprised" that the Swedish authorities and

foreign media were looking for him. Such framing makes Gui indirectly denounce the Swedish authorities and foreign media as "people with ulterior motives" who "sensationalised" his disappearance. Emphasising the voluntary nature of his reappearance in China, Gui defends his captors and their actions. By summarising the account of the events and fulfilling the three Ds task, the narration ensures that the confessant's words can only be understood in certain – unambiguous – ways.

Moreover, the brand of the programme *Oriental Horizon* can boost the confession's credibility. Debuting in 1993, the show was China's "first large-scale news magazine programme" (Hong, Lü, and Zou 2009: 42). Its brand has been built on covering pressing domestic social issues with professional journalistic language, in contrast to the usual empty political preaching. The programme itself wields respect among its audience, thus making the narration more persuasive.

On the social level, framing Gui's story within the rule of law discourse appeals to the institutionalised resonance of establishing a system of socialist rule of law with Chinese characteristics. Since the late 1970s, China's top leaders have tried to avoid the "rule of man," especially the kind that characterised Mao's late years (Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018). Much effort has been put into building the legal framework and raising general legal awareness. Between 1949 and 1978, there were a mere 134 laws passed (111 of them later being deemed invalid), among which only one was passed during the Cultural Revolution (in 1975). In the two decades after 1976, the National People's Congress and its Standing Committee passed over 337 laws (Pei 2001).

Meanwhile, the numbers of law firms and lawyers rose from 1,456 and 5,500 in 1981 to over 8,300 and 110,000 by 1998 (Peerenboom 1998). The Party has also been raising legal awareness and cultivating an ethos of respect towards law-based rules among the general public. The law-promulgating institutes began publicising laws; this practice has become an integral part of the Five-Year Plan (Peerenboom 2002). The official media produced more law-related programmes. CCTV initiated its legal channel in 2002: CCTV-12 Society and Law (changing its name to National History on 1 January 2019). The official website declares its mission as being "to implement the state policies of 'rule of law' and 'rule of virtue' to achieve

the goal of building a 'harmonious society'" (CCTV12 2018). Many other CCTV channels also broadcast legal programmes, such as *Legal Report* (1999–present) on CCTV-1. The result is the creation of a basic legal structure and a broad familiarity with the law among the general public. Thus, it is fair to conclude that China has moved away from the kind of prevalent lawlessness that characterised the Cultural Revolution – and so the rule of law has become common Party vernacular (Chen 2016; Minzner 2011; Peerenboom 2002).

Xi also claims to prioritise the rule of law in his political agenda. The year 2012 was the 30th anniversary of the 1982 Constitution, and Xi declared that China "must firmly establish throughout society, the authority of the constitution and the law" (Bandurski 2018: paragraph 7). Two years later, at the Fourth Plenum of the 18th Central Committee, rule of law became the core topic of the plenum for the first time (Peerenboom 2015). The plenum issued the important document "CCP Central Committee Decision concerning Some Major Questions in Comprehensively Moving Governing the Country According to the Law Forward" (Decision 2014), signalling potential further reform in the legal arena. The official rhetoric continues by showcasing Xi's commitment to the rule of law.

However, law remains a tool for the Party when it deems it necessary (Radin 1989; Peerenboom 2002; Zhang 2017). As mentioned before, Xi clearly rejects the notion that law should "impose meaningful restraints on the state and individual members of the ruling elite" (Peerenboom 2002: 2). "Decision 2014" unapologetically underlines the leading role of the Party in the implementation of the socialist rule of law with Chinese characteristics (Zhang 2017; Peerenboom 2015; Pils 2015), thus legitimising the use of public naming and shaming to discipline Gui. Moreover, Minzner (2018, 2011) argues that – since entering the twenty-first century – legal reform in China has been in regression. DeLisle (2015) also predicts that law will assume a more repressive role in dealing with political changes. In the name of maintaining social stability, the Party has installed a top-down policy which encourages the court to mediate any disputes rather than to follow legal norms. Apart from TV confessions, Xi's flagship anti-corruption campaign has been largely carried out through extra-legal investigation (Peerenboom 2015). Most recently, the crackdown on human rights lawyers and the abuse of Uyghurs in re-education

camps in Xinjiang are two very telling examples that, in areas such as social stability, the Party rules over the law.

As the analysis has shown, the lexical choice in the confession frames Gui directly and indirectly as a criminal who lives up to the image of a dangerous, guilt-ridden fugitive at large. Gui's confession is weaved into the narration of the story; consequently, the subsequent interpretation is at the mercy of the narration. Gui's criminal identity corresponds to the CCP's efforts to install a Party-led rule of law system ever since the end of the Cultural Revolution. However, "a criminal" is not the only image that the framing of Gui constructs. The following section explains Gui's second identity: "unfilial son."

Family Values Discourse

Filial piety is a Confucian virtue regarding the responsibility to care for and please one's ageing parents. It is, indeed, one of the most important virtues among traditional Chinese family values (Chan and Tan 2004). From this perspective, Gui is an unfilial son – as he admitted that his fugitive status meant he could not take care of his frail parents:

Excerpt Three

Gui:

> […] However, I was a criminal at large, so I couldn't go back to China and visit my […] my parents were in their eighties (swallowing hard twice). In 2015, my dad died of cancer (sobbing). I couldn't attend the funeral (crying). After this, my mother fell gravely ill, so (swallowing) […] I missed her day and night. I wanted to (crying) […] see her once more while she was alive (crying). […] Therefore, I must go back to the country and hand in myself. I will shoulder my responsibility. I […] am also willing to receive […] any punishments (*Oriental Horizon* 2016).

Modalities and verbs can facilitate the formation of the content, and indicate the intention of the text (Fairclough 2001; Halliday 1994). When Gui is recounting the passing of his father in tears, he says that he "must" return to China and "will" face all the responsibilities. The two modalities indicate a high degree of certainty of language, showing the determination of a repenting son. As to verbs, Halliday (1994, 1985) believes that they can indicate a sense of being, an action and a feeling, distinguished respectively as "relational," "material," and

"mental" verbs. A series of action verbs, such as "go" (back to the country), "hand in" (myself), "shoulder" (responsibility), and "receive" (punishments), indicate Gui's intention to take action.

The tragic consequence of Gui being the unfilial son is also clearly presented in the emotional story of the victim's family. Details about Gui's victim are scarce; it is apparent only that she was a female university student surnamed Shen, in her early twenties at the time of the accident. Her father was so grief-stricken that he became ill and suicidal. Her death means that her parents have to go through *baifaren song heifaren* (白发人送黑发人, literally, "a person with grey hair bids farewell to a person with black hair") at her funeral. It describes the tragedy that one experiences with the death of one's child – one of the three most tragic scenarios in traditional Chinese culture, alongside losing one's mother at an early age and losing one's wife mid-life. According to the narrator, her parents had hoped that she would soon *chengjia liye*: 成家立业, "start a family and a career." This lexicon choice is unusual. Despite the somewhat improved social status of women in China, the four-word idiom is conventionally associated with the male heir in a family. Sons are expected to form their families and start their careers, whereas daughters are expected to marry into other people's families and focus on domestic affairs (Zhang 2018). Using the term reveals the effort to frame the status of the daughter in this family: she was as important as a son. Consequently the loss of the daughter is equivalent to the loss of a son, which marks the end of the family line from the traditional Chinese perspective.

On the interpretative level, what is left outside the frame is as important as what is included in it. Gui describes himself as "guilty," "full of shame," and "tortured mentally for a long time" (*Oriental Horizon* 2016). He claims to be homeless because of the mental unrest after leaving China, amplifying the image of an unfilial son who has not been around his parents. However, it ignores his other possible family roles. For example, Gui is also a husband and father who has a wife and a daughter living outside China (Siu and Lam 2016). This omission presupposes that Gui's home has always been in China where he is the son. What is unsaid becomes non-existent, so that Gui's "fugitive life" abroad could only be one of solitude and rootlessness.

On the social level, the framing of Gui as a genuinely repentant son aims to resonate with the most ingrained and important social relationship in China – kinship (Fei, Hamilton, and Wang 1992). The latter has been perpetuated through legal measures as well as moral pressure. Xi's era has witnessed the spread of family values such as filial piety to the public and legal domains. On 1 July 2013, the revised "Protection of the Rights and Interests of Elderly People" came into effect. Its 18th article demands that "family members living apart from the elderly shall frequently visit or greet the elderly" (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress 2012). People were astonished at the moral decline that visiting one's parents had descended from a virtue to the realm of law. Despite the fact that this regulation exists more on paper than in practice, the government's message is clear. For years, the government has warned everyone against a morally degraded materialistic society which has fatally eroded traditional social virtues. Meanwhile, there has been an individual-centred moral turn (Yan 2011). The Party vows to uphold this virtue by codifying it into national law.

Compared with legal measures, social pressure and moral judgement are still the more prevalent weapons used. Through the re-contextualisation of starting a family/career rhetoric from the son to the daughter, Gui is framed as a bad person who not only neglects his filial duty but also deprives the parents of another family of being taken care of by their only daughter. This exemplifies another challenging yet here omitted social issue: the *shidu* (失独) family. This refers to parents who, under the one-child policy, lose their only child and are unable to have another (Fong 2016). According to official estimates, there had been over one million such families by 2010 – and the number is still rising (Wu and Dang 2013). Losing one's child is universally tragic, but what makes it worse in China is the child's indispensable role in caring for the ageing parents (Han 2017; Hesketh, Lu, and Zhu 2005). According to the most recent population census (2010), there are around 177 million people aged over 60 years old in China (Ma et al. 2010). Social security and medical insurance are supposed to cover city residents, but are only available to 40 million people. The rural population is neither fully covered nor enjoys the same standard of service (Yi 2013). The lack of care facilities and medical expenditure means that most of the elderly have only their children to turn to.

However, *shidu* families do not even have children to turn to. The government had promised to take care of the parents when promoting the one-child policy in the early 1980s (Bao 2013). Slogans such as "Family planning is very good. Government helps raise the old" (Wang 2018) provide a glimpse of the picture here. However, in reality, there is a huge gap between the needs of *shidu* families and the local implementation of the relevant policy stipulations (Han 2017). Therefore, when facing the grieving parents of Gui's victim, assigning blame solely to the culprit distracts the audience from questioning the government's own responsibilities. Consequently, the framing underlines the moral condemnation of Gui – which eventually comes to outweigh the legal consequences. The framing thus constructs Gui's causing death by drink-driving as less serious than the "real" crime here – breaking up a family and forcing the parents to experience the death of their only child, with all the aforementioned ramifications of that.

By advocating filial culture, the framing shifts the responsibility of retirement care completely onto the younger generation – who are likely to be the only children to their parents, and who are themselves facing the mounting pressures of simultaneously working and child-rearing. Their failure to take care of their own parents can now have legal consequences. However, in the era of the revival of classic tradition and Confucian culture (Minzner 2018), moral stigmatisation is more detrimental to one's reputation. It generates a deep sense of guilt in adult children, as demonstrated in Gui's tears when remembering his absence while his parents were ageing.

Discussion

Having examined these two discourses, this section now reflects on two implications that arise from the analysis: the contradictions between the two identified discourses and the banality of Gui's confession.

Moral Tradition Versus Legal System?

The two main discourses in Gui's case show that the dominant power in society is defining what norms are the legally and morally correct ones. Nonetheless, there are noticeable contradictions between the

two discourses. The final words from Gui in the confession (Except Two, rule of law) capture nicely such conflict.

Gui has been forced to claim that his return to China is voluntary, and identifies himself more as Chinese. This leads him to request the Swedish authorities to skip the relevant legal proceedings, even though they are a legally guaranteed right of foreign nationals in China. Despite the emphasis on the rule of law, Gui's self-identification as Chinese (having been born and raised in China, having Chinese parents, citing Chinese classics, etc.) overrides his legal status (a Swedish passport holder). After re-contextualising the family values discourse to the national level, the filial duty of a Chinese son to his motherland triumphs over law and order. Meanwhile, Gui asks the Swedish authorities to "respect" his "personal rights" – which, ironically, are protected by the law that he has just been made to undermine. The battle between the discourses rightly captures as well as reinforces the current Party-centred legal structure and the definition of what it means to be Chinese. What we witness here is a selective application of legal regulations and interpretation of Chinese culture – both undertaken so as to alleviate the pressure on the Party under Xi, in the face of many thorny issues.

Banal Crime News

CCP propaganda is usually pompous and overbearing. However, there is plenty of subtle persuasion inundating society too. Gui's confession, like many other TV ones, takes the form of crime news (Yoon 2015; Gardner 2018). As mentioned earlier, there are numerous TV programmes designed to familiarise the public with the concept of law. Gui's confession is camouflaged nicely among them. From people's existing ideological foundations, Gui's confession churns out the familiar – even clichéd – traffic accident tragedy, morally failed fugitive, irresponsible son, and eventual triumph of justice. In turn, the confession reinforces associated stereotypes and norms.

Therefore, I argue that the propaganda value of the TV confessions of those who are neither Party members nor well-known figures lies in this very banality. For the domestic audience, Gui's confession is not a show-trial type of media spectacle. Kellner's definition of a media spectacle highlights its popular nature: they often "disrupt ordinary and habitual flows of information" (Kellner 2016: 3). Gui's case is hardly "disruptively" popular among its domestic audience.

However, banality does not mean harmlessness (Arendt 1964; Billig 1995). Such TV confessions can quietly function as a way to prime people for a society whose cultural and political norms are increasingly at the mercy of Xi's ideology. The periodic injection of such mundane confession news insidiously develops emotional and expectations-related immunity to governance failures.

Conclusion: Implications and Contributions

Through the case of Gui Minhai, this paper has examined the recent resurgence of mediated confession. Transformed from an intra-Party disciplinary technique to a mass campaign during the Cultural Revolution, mediated confession today has evolved into a tool that helps consolidate the Party's rule. While CDA cannot offer generalised observations, it can provide an in-depth explanation of the framing of the confessant Gui's two identities: a criminal and an unfilial son. It also links these to the wider political agenda of bolstering the socialist rule of law with Chinese characteristics and the promotion of traditional family values. The findings of the study demonstrate that Gui's TV confession captures in microcosm the Party's logic in promoting certain social, cultural, and political norms. Further academic research on other TV confessions will deepen our understanding of the general characteristics of framing as a propaganda strategy.

In an ideal world, when someone agrees to go on TV to confess this person is giving approval to this being a legitimate method of self-criticism and showing submission to the authority who demands it. However, it is extremely likely that Gui's confession was orchestrated and forced (Safeguard Defenders 2018; Fiskesjö 2017). Roughly a month after Gui's confession, on 17 January 2016, Hong Kong's Phoenix TV broadcast another televised confession that involved Gui and his colleagues apologising for trading "unauthorised" books in mainland China (Phoenix TV 2016). Meanwhile, tensions have been high between China and Sweden not only over Gui's confession but also another Swedish activist Peter Dahlin's similar experience and eventual deportation. Gui was said to have lived under surveillance outside official custody after the confession. However, on 20 January 2018, Gui was taken away from two Swedish consular staff who were accompanying him on a train to Beijing, where he was headed for medical reasons. Three weeks later, Gui appeared in a third TV con-

fession and expressed the "shame" he felt for "leaking national secrets" and being "tricked" by the Swedish authorities into attempting to escape abroad again. Gui was seen claiming that "Sweden used me as a pawn against China" (*South China Morning Post* 2018). In this way, TV confessions are by no means a genuine form of consent.

However, it is clear that they can strategically and conveniently mould both cultural norms and legal regulations as part of justifying the Party's actions. This has a crucial practical implication: "traditional culture" has been dubbed as the "root" or the "soul" of the nation, increasingly so after 1989 (Perry 2017). In facing declining political trust in the past two decades (Wang and You 2016), the CCP needs to restore its credibility by making it difficult for everyone to think critically. Compared with Maoist-style propaganda, the current official persuasion – adorned with that traditional culture as well as "law and order" – is much subtler and potentially more effective. As Gui's TV confession shows, the framing distracts the audience from governance failure and shifts the blame onto individuals instead. Meanwhile, it reproduces the moral panic of an ever-more economically polarised society. Ironically, traditional culture and law and order conveniently become the excuses for the Party to justify its own immoral and illegal behaviour in dealing with domestic conflicts.

Apart from the practical implications of its research, this article also contributes to a new understanding of the propaganda value of TV confessions. For those who were aware of Gui's abduction, the TV confession is chilling intimidation, showcasing the capability of the Party to coerce someone – both physically and mentally – into destroying themself. However, for those who are oblivious to the deceptive nature of TV confessions, Gui's case is just another one among the many triumphant "justice has long arms" cases on TV which have been regularly broadcast to increase the awareness of the law among the general public. Therefore, instead of viewing the TV confession as a political – show-trial-style – media spectacle, I argue that it resembles more ordinary crime news. Its domestic propaganda value lies precisely in its banality, which blends into the Party's everyday narrative of what the world looks like, who the Chinese should be, and how they should behave.

The resurgence of mediated confession may be an indication of regression to the Maoist form of social control. The method of generating fear through actual disciplinary actions coupled with mediated

confession is similar to practices of the Maoist era. Both Mao and Xi have relied on confession to create mental pressure, to enforce their rule (Minzner 2018). However, this study here has been unable to address the issue of the audience's reception of TV confessions. It seems that Xi has not resorted to the mass campaigns which characterised Mao's own movements; watching TV is arguably a form of passive mass participation, though (Meyrowitz 1985; Anderson 1983). Has Xi only borrowed Mao's name and strategy partially to appear as a stronger, firmer, and more legitimate leader than he really is? An audience-oriented study is evidently urgently needed to understand better the effects of TV confessions.

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